



A Look Back . . .

Bushnell, IL 1854-2004

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Reva Jackman

The mural displayed on the west wall of the Bushnell Post Office lobby was painted by Miss Reva Jackman. John Markley was postmaster at the time it was commissioned in 1938. As part of the New Deal Arts Projects, the oil painting, done on canvas, cost about \$560.

Jackman also painted the post office mural at Attica, Indiana entitled "Trek of the Covered Wagons to Indiana." You may view both these paintings online at <http://www.ulib.iupui.edu/imls/activities/wpa/artwork.html>.



Reva Jackman is included in a list of 32,000 North American artists in the 2003 edition of *The Artists Bluebook*. She is also in the 2001 edition of *Davenport's Art Reference*, the 1985 and 1999 listings of *Who Was Who in American Art*; the 1990 *The Annual Exhibition Record of the Art Institute of Chicago*, and Chris Pettey's 1985 edition of *Dictionary of Women Artists, International Dictionary of Women*. Jackman lived from 1892 to 1966.

New Deal Arts Projects

During the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s and into the early years of World War II, the Federal government supported the arts in unprecedented ways. For 11 years, between 1933 and 1943, federal tax dollars employed artists, musicians, actors, writers, photographers, and dancers.

The New Deal arts projects provided work for jobless artists, but they also had a larger mission, to promote American art and culture and to give more Americans access to what President Franklin Roosevelt described as "an abundant life." The projects saved thousands of artists from poverty and despair and enabled Americans all across the country to see an original painting for the first time, attend their first professional live theater, or take their first music or drawing class.

The economic crisis of the 1930s focused the attention of Americans on the lives and struggles of ordinary folk. Not surprisingly, much New Deal art reflected this preoccupation with "the people." Visual artists, writers, filmmakers, and playwrights concentrated many of their creative efforts on the patterns of everyday life, especially the world of work. A recurring theme was the strength and dignity of common men and women, even as they faced difficult circumstances.

Writers and folklorists used the new technique of oral history interviewing to write work histories that were integrated into broader state and local histories. Painters, printmakers, photographers, and sculptors looked to the streets to depict daily routines and to find models. Federal Theatre Project plays used music, dialect, and images from popular culture to enhance stories that centered on the lives of ordinary people.

In depicting the course of daily life, New Deal artists memorialized routine events such as waiting for a train or watching workers from a city window. Behind these celebrations of the mundane, however, lay a belief that such vignettes represented the essence of modern American life as lived by most individuals. Artists considered it to be their responsibility to capture such core experiences. **Processing, delivering, and receiving the mail were common themes in New Deal murals.**

But the arts projects also sparked controversy. Some politicians believed them to be wasteful propaganda and wanted them ended; others wanted them expanded. Such controversy, along with the United States' entry into World War II, eventually killed the projects. But much of what they fashioned has survived through the efforts of museums, libraries, and archives.

Thank you. . .

Our thanks to Bushnell Postmaster Michael Delgado for sharing information included in this article. Much of the material is copied from online sources. For more information, please see: http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/new_deal_for_the_arts/rediscovering_america1.html#. To view other post office murals, go to <http://www.wpamurals.com/ilpost.html>.

"American Scene"

In the visual arts, the creation of the federal arts projects coincided with the popularity of the movement known as the "American Scene." American Scene artists were especially interested in regional and small-town life and produced views of local color and straightforward celebrations of ideals such as community, democracy, and hard work. Although the arts projects did not force artists to work in one style, the American Scene became the unofficial style of the projects--especially in public works such as murals.

Franklin Roosevelt summarized the philosophy behind the American Scene effort: "Always the heart and soul of our country will be the heart and soul of the common man." (campaign address, Cleveland, Ohio, November 2, 1940).

Mural Restoration

The U.S. Post Office policy manual refers to the murals as "a vital part of America's national heritage, as they comprise the only comprehensive public collection portraying the culture and character of the American people for a given period . . . and every effort must be made by the Postal Service to preserve and safeguard these cultural assets . . . for present and future generations."

Commissions for the artwork usually were awarded to winners of national and regional competitions. Approximately 1200 murals and 300 sculptures were commissioned for Post Offices across the country.

But with age, the paintings may darken, the varnish can yellow, and dirt can accumulate on the surface. Smoke leaves layers of soot on a painting, plus high humidity and air pollution may also cause damage. All restoration work must be done by a qualified fine arts conservator and overpainting is considered inexcusable.

On October 3, 2003, staff from the Chicago Conservation Center known for its professional standards in the field of fine art restoration, arrived in Bushnell to restore the Post Office mural. "They worked in the Lewistown Post Office that morning and came to Bushnell at noon. By 5 p.m. they were finished, and returned Saturday morning to put on the sealer. The difference is amazing. For example, now you can read the 'U.S. Mail' on the saddle bag, the colors in the floor rug are bright, and Jackman's signature is clearly visible," Postmaster Delgado explained.



Before Restoration



After Restoration